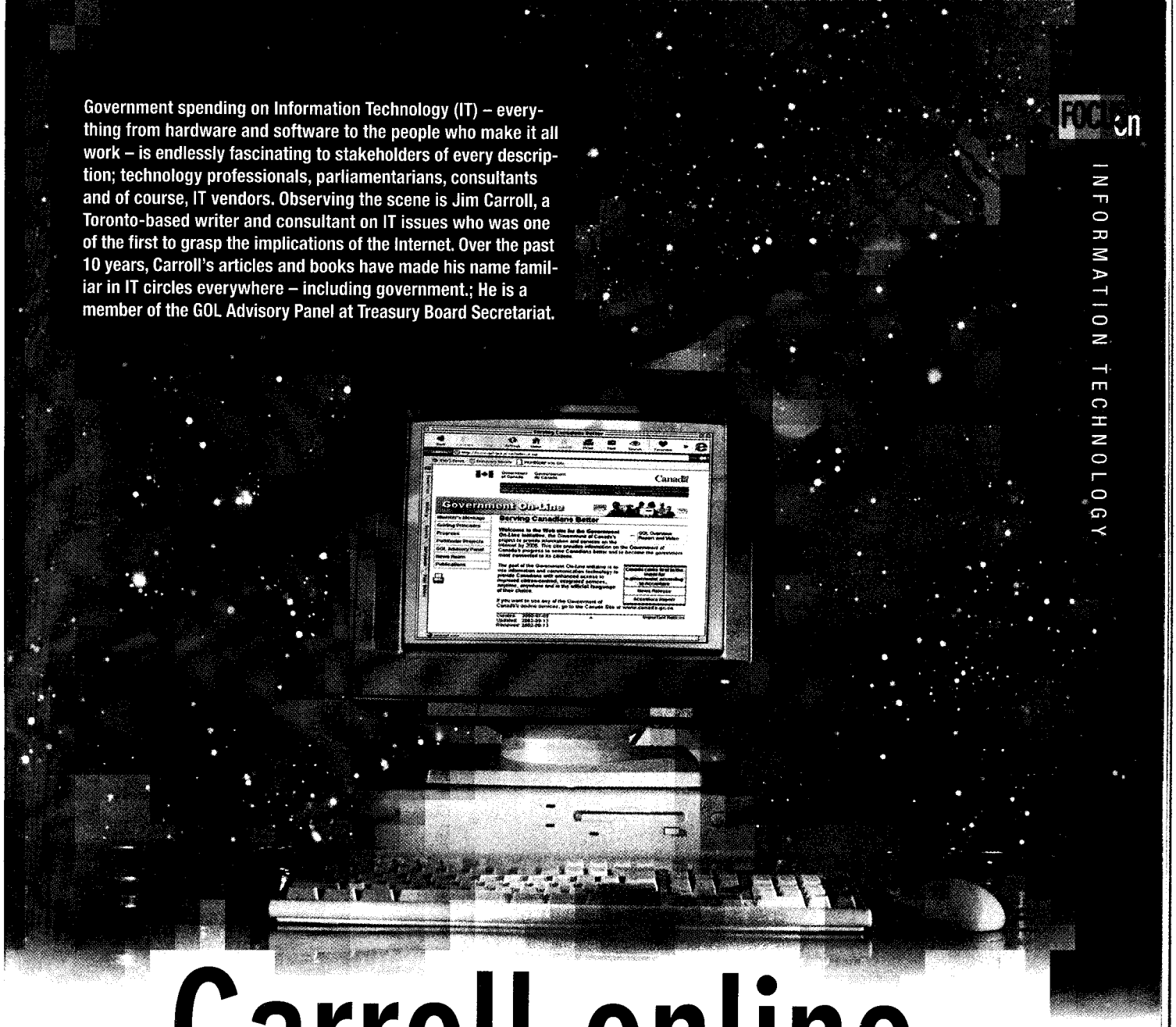
Government spending on Information Technology (IT) – everything from hardware and software to the people who make it all work – is endlessly fascinating to stakeholders of every description; technology professionals, parliamentarians, consultants and of course, IT vendors. Observing the scene is Jim Carroll, a Toronto-based writer and consultant on IT issues who was one of the first to grasp the implications of the Internet. Over the past 10 years, Carroll's articles and books have made his name familiar in IT circles everywhere – including government.; He is a member of the GOL Advisory Panel at Treasury Board Secretariat.




# Carroll online

by Robert Parkins

## IT guru Jim Carroll on the technology scene

**How does the federal GOL program feel to you these days? Is it working?**

Certainly, in certain departments there are some people in the federal public service who "get it." At the level of the deputy ministers, there's a lot going on in terms of interdepartmental coordination and discussion on what can be done. So from that perspective they're making strides. On the other hand, the scope of the project is absolutely massive. We're talking about a fundamental re-engineering of government, and that's certainly much more than a $600 million project.

**Yes, it's not just a computer program – it's a different way of doing business over-all.**

Right – a fundamental change. So I don't think it's something we do once and then wash our hands because we're finished and go on to what's next. We're at baby steps in what will be a long and very complex process.

**So how would you grade them these days? That sounds like a B, or maybe a B plus.**

I wouldn't want to do that, but – I'd say that about virtually any organization, whether it's government or private sector. I've been saying this consistently since 1995 – this is a voyage that's going to take five, 10, 15, 20 – maybe even a greater number of years, and it's vague, it's complicated, it won't be easy.

**Part of GOL is buying the hardware and the software to make it go. How does government do on that score? Do they know how to buy IT? Are some jurisdictions doing it better?**

Again, certain departments and municipalities are charging ahead further. Look for example at the Canada Customs and Revenue Agency. That's a department that really gets it, in terms of what they're trying to accomplish, in terms of the interaction they've already put in place with technology and the Internet, in terms of what they've developed with respect to security infrastructure. I think they're a department you could hold out as one that really gets it. Without naming names, I think there are other departments that don't get it to any degree, or are only beginning to get it.

I think the biggest problem is that we still need a tremendous amount of education throughout the civil service as to what this is all about. The problem is that when you mention e-biz or e-government or the Internet, people think about online shopping – they think about some silly type of credit card transaction in order to sell things. Instead, it's fundamentally changing the way we do business in order to achieve costs savings in the way we do business. Whether that's government or business or an association or what have you, that's the key objective here, and I think there's a lot of people who don't realize that.

**So the challenge then is to figure out what it is and then buy your hardware and software accordingly?**

I don't even think it's that. I think it's a process of understanding what it is – what's possible, the business drivers, the business strategy and business opportunity – and then determining how we're going to pursue this – what makes sense. I think the hardware and the software is very far down the list of what we do.

**Are GOL and similar programs getting enough funding to do this?**

I don't think $600 million – it's something, but for the scope of the [GOL] project, I think it represents but a starting point. I think they recognize that, for $600 million, we're not going to fundamentally re-engineer the way government service is delivered. But I think we can get well down the road in terms of our understanding of what it is and where we're going, and deliver a number of very innovative programs. But no – I don't think there's any government organization in the world that has committed adequate funds to this.

**Another phrase around GOL is ROI – return on investment. Is ROI on GOL good enough? How do you measure it? Is it in better governance? Is it in dollars?**

I think that would be the end objective of all of that. The objective of any of these programs is: It is a cost savings exercise. That's the end result. If I need some federal tax forms, and I can click a few buttons with my mouse and do customer self-service to grab those forms, rather than utilizing some more expensive method to get those forms, then there are direct cost savings as a result. That's where everybody is trying to go.

*Author, commentator Jim Carroll believes in adopting tomorrow today.*
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**It sounds like you're pretty bullish on government's capacity to know how to manage these kinds of projects.**

What's kind of funny is that we're in a tech downturn just now. There's a lot of tech negativity out there. In the corporate sector, there's been a dramatic change in the willingness of companies to pursue e-biz-related initiatives. But we haven't seen the same thing with government. Government has said: Well, we've got to do some of this – pursue some of these projects. There's much greater willingness to keep doing what needs to be done. Whereas in the corporate sector, because of the downturn, a lot of them have just sat back and said we're going to put everything on the back burner for a few years.

**Then there's the question of the skill sets to run IT projects in government. They have to hire all those computer science people, and managers for them. Are they able to afford those skill sets?**

It's always been an issue. Two years ago, I was speaking at the Association of Professional Executives in Ottawa about how we've got Silicon Valley Ottawa down the street, and they're floating career options in front of these kids, and it's very difficult for you to attract and retain people of the proper calibre. Well, I think that's changed. The dot-com era collapsed, the telecoms went south, and I think there's a lot of people who now look to government jobs as something stable. So that's become less of an issue.

## We're talking about a fundamental reengineering of government.

But it's not an issue of just hiring computer people, it's the fact that everybody's jobs have to change, everybody's skills have to change. I'm doing a keynote speech next month to an international *Hansard* conference – the folks who are responsible for *Hansard* everywhere. And much of what I'll be talking about will be to the fact that we've got to change our skill sets. You can't just think of yourselves as people who transcribe parliamentary proceedings. You are becoming something much more because of technology. We're seeing a merger of broadcast skills with transcription skills; we're seeing a merger of different capabilities. The point is that it's not just hiring people to do this, it's changing the roles – transforming the roles – of everybody throughout the civil service.

**Let me ask you about measurement – the Common Measurement Tool initiative, those kinds of things. Is measurement filtering through to the operational level?**

I don't think we can even begin to measure half of what we're doing – again, because of the scope of the projects. Take e-procure-


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ment: Certainly there are measurement capabilities there. I was speaking to the Purchasing Management Association of Canada last month. We might have a typical transaction costing $120 when it's paper based and drive that down to $10 if we do it electronically. But that's a very simple thing. From a broader perspective, it's very difficult.

**Let's turn to the digital divide. Can government spend its way out of the digital divide? There's been much talk for example of that proposed billion-dollar federal fund.**

I was a fan of that. I'm not a big fan of government intervention, and big government spending, but I thought the broadband initiative was a good idea... I've long been saying John Manley's the only geek on Parliament Hill, because he "got" the Internet a long time ago. When he was at Industry Canada, he put in place the Community Access Program. The result of that is that there are a lot of small communities across the country where there is Internet access, where there might not otherwise be, in public spaces – in libraries, city halls and things like that. And that's a good thing; programs like that have only helped.

**So there's a clear role for government in addressing the digital divide?**

Sure, because let's face it – the communication companies have been doing what they can to try to get more infrastructure into remote communities. But it's easier to serve Toronto than Atikokan; there's more of a business case. It's the same as with Air Canada; they want to serve the big communities and not the small ones. If we can do something to fix that disparity, we should, because this is damned important.

**From where you sit, are there different rates of success with different levels of government in dealing with the digital divide?**

I think the biggest problem right now is that some governments will be succumbing to the digital malaise that the corporate sector is succumbing to, and I think it would be critical for any government to keep on going. There's this belief out there now that everything that's been talked about through the last 10 years has all been nonsense; dot-coms have collapsed. Well, no. All that has happened is that the idiots have left the building. A lot of the business fundamentals, the business strategies, the business opportunities don't make sense, and I think we might see a lot of pullback in the initiatives because of the dot-com hangover, and I don't think that's a good thing.

**It's been suggested that part of the challenge for e-government is that it tends to see IT as an industry rather than as a tool.**

There are a lot of organizations – governments and corporations – where the big decision that has to be made is do we adopt a Microsoft platform, or do we adopt another platform, or do we go with WordPerfect? The big decision should be: What are the key strategies we're trying to pursue? What are the ways in which we're trying to deliver customer self-service? Where are the key cost savings? In a lot of governments, techies drive big decisions. And it has to come back to the business strategy driving the decisions.

**What are the prospects for some of those other technologies – open source, Linux applications – in government online programs? It's a Microsoft universe right now.**

There should be more. I'm a huge fan of Linux. I've got probably a dozen Linux servers in my home here. It works, it's reliable, it's stable – if you look at an Internet service provider, they're running their backbone on Linux, or some other type of Unix, and not Microsoft Windows products, because you don't want the darn thing to crash. And we've seen a lot of activity, particularly in Europe and the Third World, where they're saying we should get more involved in open source, as a means of trying to bridge the digital divide or what have you. There's probably a heck of a lot more we could be doing in Canada... the simple fact is it works, it's more reliable, it's more cost effective, it gives you a lot more alternatives.

**Privacy and security issues: Do you spend your way out of 9/11? There are tradeoffs between privacy on the one hand and security on the other – is it hard to get that right? Is there any prospect that government can ever get that right?**

It's one of the biggest issues. A lot of it is behavioural; people who are freaked about their credit cards on the Internet think nothing of giving a credit card to a waiter, which is completely bizarre. On the other hand, it's been shown that most organizations don't pay proper attention to security, don't spend enough money on security. Having said that, I think government is probably more security conscious than the private sector, excluding the financial sector. The Canada Customs and Revenue folks **know** that security and privacy is the most fundamentally important thing they have to deal with.

> We still need a tremendous amount of education throughout the civil service.

**And yet you get these dust-ups over the merits of, say, PKI [public key infrastructure] versus SSL [secure socket layer]...**

But that's simply decisions. The fact that they're having those dust-ups is a good thing, because it indicates that they're deep into it. Take a mining company: Are they having the same type of dust-up at an executive level? Probably not; security and privacy would not rank as important.

*Robert Parkins is the former editor of* Summit *magazine. He is President of Parkins Communication Services, located in Ottawa and his background includes senior positions in the federal public service and many years as a journalist.*